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Are you worried about food safety when your children are home alone after school?

Today, many children are often alone for a few hours after school. Do you feel comfortable with them preparing snacks and sometimes even preparing a meal unsupervised? The information in the following USDA FSIS press release, written by Susan Conley and Steve Cohen, is a important today as it was in 2004. The Delaware Department of Agriculture urges everyone with children to heed the advice given below.

Home Alone? After School Snacks and Food Safety USDA Quiz for Parents and Kids

WASHINGTON, September 7, 2004 – Bookbags and backpacks get quickly tossed aside and the munchies take over when kids burst through the door after school. If your child is home alone for an hour or two after school, how can you make sure their snacks are safe from foodborne bacteria and they are protected from dangers in the kitchen?

These days, many kids don't just open a bag of chips - some make cookies from scratch; others use a microwave to heat up instant noodles or soup. Sound safe? Not if the cookie maker tastes the raw homemade cookie dough because that could lead to Salmonella poisoning and sometimes hospitalization. And heating soup in the microwave isn't safe if the cook isn't tall enough to reach the microwave and spills hot soup on himself. That's a major cause of serious burns in children.

"There's a great hunger for accurate information," says USDA Under Secretary for Food Safety Dr. Elsa Murano. "People want to know how to keep their families safe and healthy. Education is not a substitute - but a complement - to strong food safety policies and programs. Education serves to alert the public about hazards that exist and can be addressed by safe food handling and food selection."

Before you let kids have the run of the kitchen, USDA advises you to take a little quiz together:

Quiz: True or False -

1. Put backpacks on the floor, not the counter.
2. Washing your hands with warm water and soap washes bacteria down the drain.
3. You need to wash fruits and vegetables under cold running water before eating.
4. Cooked foods should not be put on the same plate that held raw meat or poultry (unless the plate has been thoroughly washed.).
5. Lunch meat or deli meat does not need to be refrigerated until the package is opened.
6. Don't leave leftovers on the counter for more than 2 hours.
7. Always wash your hands after touching raw meat or poultry.
8. Eating homemade cookie dough is not safe because it may contain raw eggs.

(Answers: 1, 2, 3, 4, True. 5 - False. 6,7,8 - True.)

Take some time for a "Food Safety Workshop" with your children. Walk them around the kitchen -- explain how to safely use the microwave and teach them some basic food safety tips. Check out the USDA FSIS Web site for

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more information - www.fsis.usda.gov. The site also includes a variety of [games and puzzles](#).

First of all, don't let children who don't know how to read use the microwave oven. Reading and understanding directions is extremely important. If they're old enough to use a microwave, follow these tips:

- Reheat hot dogs until they are hot and steaming. Pierce hot dogs with a fork before putting them into the microwave oven to keep them from exploding.
- Foods and liquids are heated unevenly in the microwave, so stir or rotate food midway through cooking. If you don't, you'll have cold spots where harmful bacteria can survive.
- Cover a dish of food for microwaving with a lid or plastic wrap and wrap loose to let steam escape. The moist heat will help destroy harmful bacteria.
- To prevent burns, carefully remove food from the microwave oven. Use potholders and uncover foods away from your face so steam can escape.
- Do not use plastic containers such as margarine tubs or other one-time use containers in the microwave. They can warp or melt, possibly causing harmful chemicals to get in the food.
- Do not use metal or aluminum foil containers in the microwave. They can get too hot and burn. Use only glass and other containers labeled "made for microwave use."
- Throw away leftovers (and any perishable food) that stays out longer than two hours - or one hour if it's over 90 °F. When in doubt, throw it out!

Science Behind the Kitchen Warnings

Why should you put food back in the refrigerator as soon as possible? Bacteria need time and the right environment to grow and multiply - such as moisture and warmth. Most foodborne illness-causing organisms grow quickly above 40 °F. Some bacteria can double their numbers every 20 minutes at temperatures above 40 °F. In a few hours, bacteria on food can cause an illness or form "toxins" that might not be fully destroyed by cooking.

Learn How to Fight Bacteria

Put the Fight BAC!® messages on your refrigerator. The Fight BAC!® campaign is a public-private partnership of industry, consumer groups and the Food Safety and Inspection Service of USDA and other government agencies. The messages remind consumers how to reduce the risk of foodborne illness.

- **Clean.** Wash hands and surfaces often.
- **Separate.** Separate raw meat, poultry and egg products from cooked foods to avoid cross-contamination.
- **Cook.** Raw meat, poultry and egg products need to be cooked thoroughly. Use a food thermometer to ensure foods have reached a high enough temperature to kill any harmful bacteria that might be present.
- **Chill.** Refrigerate promptly.

Teach children to use a food thermometer to check for safety and doneness. If reheating leftovers, heat to 165 °F. When grilling or re-heating ready-to-eat foods such as hot dogs and sausages, also heat to 165 °F.

For more food safety information in English and Spanish, call the USDA Meat and Poultry Hotline toll free at 1-888-MPHotline (1-888-674-6854) or TTY: 1-800-256-7072. You can call the year-round hotline Monday through Friday from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. EST. Or, listen to timely recorded food safety messages at the same number 24 hours a day. Check out the FSIS Web site at <http://www.fsis.usda.gov>. E-mail questions can be answered by MPHotline.fsis@usda.gov.

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